Failure in Intercultural Cooperation

Sebastian Kunert and Jonas Schumacher

I meet Jonas Schumacher during his stay in Europe in 2017. While we talk, one of his German Board Members in Germany and one volunteer join us. They all are part of Masifunde,[1] a non-profit organisation offering educational programs to township children in South Africa. Since 2003, they are active in Port Elizabeth. For this commitment, Jonas Schumacher and his team were honoured several times including the prestigious Marion-Dönhoff-Award for International Understanding and Reconciliation.

Sebastian Kunert: *When you were in South Africa for the first time, did you as a German in South Africa experience a typical Clash of Culture?*

Jonas Schumacher: *Yes, several times. I was in South Africa for the first time in 1998 after I had finished high school. For almost 18 months I worked and lived in Walmer township in Port Elizabeth, a purely black, Xhosa speaking community. Never before had I dealt with an African culture, or the Xhosa culture in particular. I had not received any intercultural training or preparation of any kind. Looking back now, I am convinced I acted like an "intercultural sledgehammer" (*laughing*). Almost every day I must have found myself in situations where I behaved culturally insensitive—and all of that simply by behaving the way I was used to behave as an eighteen year old teenager in Germany: in the way I communicated, how I behaved in public, how I dressed, how I treated the elderly, how I interacted with younger people, the way I tried to build relationships with the people in the township—all of that I did exactly how I would have done it in Germany.*

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Sebastian Kunert: *And in return, how did you experience the people and their culture?*

Jonas Schumacher: *Well, I was constantly surrounded by people who seemed to behave rather weird. Without any intercultural training I had no other choice but judging people's behaviour and way of communicating through my German cultural lenses. According to my norms and values, I experienced many people as somehow dishonest, rather unreliable and often simply chaotic. It took me months to firstly realise and then to start to slowly understand the differences between our cultures. And the differences between the German and the Xhosa culture could hardly been much bigger. Firstly, I learned about the traditions and customs, I began to adopt some behavioural patterns of my friends and surroundings. I simply copied and modelled them. And even though it did not feel natural to me I noticed how I blended in better, relationships became more positive and my levels of acceptance increased.*

Sebastian Kunert: *Today, do you see something like this again, for example with your German volunteers who are in South Africa for a year or two?*

Jonas Schumacher: *The main difference is that today's volunteers receive intensive preparation. They undergo intercultural training in Germany, orientation days after arrival in South Africa and they have a mentor who assists them for example with intercultural translation. They arrive fully aware of potential cultural clashes. This obviously does not prevent such clashes but one is more aware of the cultural differences.*

When things are going smooth at work, cultural difference seem to vanish or the team—both local and international—are able to tolerate the differences and work together. It is usually when the workload is high, when things do not work as planned and when the team is under pressure when cultural clashes happen. Then my South African team experiences the Germans as stiff, uneasy, and often rude in the way they communicate. Many Germans in a situation like that tend to "explode" and vent. They must express their frustration and tend to generalise. One hears comments like "Nothing works here!", "It is total chaos!". The venting and direct expression of frustration can cause long lasting damage within a team, especially, when deadlines need to be met.

Several scientists addressed those experiences with studies, that aim to describe differences in human patterns of thought and behaviour using cultural standards (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Inglehart, Basanez, Diez-Medrano, Halman, & Luijkx, 2004). One of the most mentioned aspects is time. Hall (1990), for example, defines monochron and polychron orientation: *In monochronic cultures, times is experienced and used in a linear fashion, prescribing a consecutive order in which specific action occur. This orientation demands a high degree of self-management in terms of planning and reliability on a personal level, as well as in managing public systems and structures, as in the public transportation system for example. Accordingly, monochronic cultures tend to have a lower tolerance threshold when it comes to changes in timing, scheduling and other interruptions. In contrast, polychronic cultures span many different levels in pursuing their intended communicative action, any number of which can occur simultaneously. This orientation requires a high degree of flexibility and consequently, individuals from these cultures tend to have a*

high tolerance with respect to time/schedule overlaps and interruptions. (Layes, 2010, p. 56).

Furthermore, Germans in particular are known for their direct communication and forthright conflict resolution style. In contrast to most other societies, they tend to be little diplomatic and at the same time not very vulnerable (Schroll-Machl, 2016).

Sebastian Kunert: *Does this often lead to the cancellation of volunteer stays or projects?*

Jonas Schumacher: *I cannot remember intercultural clashes causing such failures. More often, volunteers seclude themselves in their little "German community" and work amongst each other or carry out projects on their own to avoid the emotional stress and frustration often caused by cultural clashes. For many, to achieve on an operational level and to have the general feeling of success at work is more important than to succeed in intercultural cooperation.*

Sebastian Kunert: *Why is the cultural clash so emotional and potentially frustrating?*

Jonas Schumacher: *I think the most emotional part about it is that one arrives in South Africa with the perception of being absolutely liberal and tolerant. But in the moment of a cultural clash one tends to generalise, one starts to think that "all blacks or Xhosas are like this or that!". To notice or even express such thoughts is to some degree shocking and disturbing since these thoughts are ultimately racist and discriminating. It needs a lot of energy to unfold the cultural differences without judgment and without a Eurocentric worldview which might see the own culture as superior.*

That's why many simply back off, do their own thing and avoid the cultural confrontation to ultimately avoid such feelings. The interesting thing though is that often younger people seem to be abler to intuitively navigate and adopt in intercultural clashes. The older a person gets the more set in his or her ways one seems to be and the less flexible one gets interculturally.

Sebastian Kunert: *Let us move to the level of organizations. Do you see Masifunde as an intercultural melting pot? The many German expatriates, the South African staff and cooperation partners on site. How do you deal with the danger of failure?*

Jonas Schumacher: *We have no specific strategy to avoid failure based on cultural differences. We all simply get more experienced and learn to translate cultural clashes. The local Masifunde team knows "how Germans tick" and can be more accommodating and tolerant to integrate Germans in to the team.*

I would not describe us as a melting pot, since we do not become "one". I would rather describe us as a bowl of salad with many different colourful ingredients which do not melt and do not become one, but which all are needed to make the salad or the organisation respectively work.

The glue within our salad bowl of an organisation is our strong organizational culture which builds on our shared vision. We are working on something bigger and more important than ourselves. That connects us. If someone does not buy in to the vision and commits to it, then the person does not fit in, no matter if they are South African or German. Be who you are, behave culturally according to your

own believes, but go the extra mile for our ultimate goal—which is to initiate change within the impoverished communities of South Africa. This approach works very well for us.

Sebastian Kunert: *If we go up another level and look at your business landscape, do you observe other development aid organizations struggling? Do they fail?*

Jonas Schumacher: *In the development industry which still likes to send consultants and development aid workers to the global south, I see one regular pattern of failure. Frequently, NGOs or in general funders from the north which finance projects in the south send Europeans to assist within the project. The implementing partner in the south accepts the support, often not brave enough to say "no" since they depend on the funds, or they say "no" in an indirect manner which is not understood by the partner in the north. The development worker is then often considered to be almost like a spy and extended arm of the funder, an informer who could communicate internal information to the outside. They then ensure that this person stays "happy" and does not get a full insight of the real challenges. This leads to regular failure in our industry: frustrated development aid workers in failing NGOs.*

Sebastian Kunert: *How would you finally define intercultural failure?*

Jonas Schumacher: *I think you have failed if you are no longer able to see the beauty and potential within intercultural teams. If you are stuck in what you call the cultural shock, that you only see the negative and frustrating part of the other cultures. One can learn so much from one another and create amazing results if one makes use of the strengths within each culture.*

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